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Eastern and Western labor groups vie to influence unions in Africa

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Gaborone, Botswana—Eastern and Western labor organizations—including the AFL-CIO—are spending millions of dollars of their governments' money in a contest to woo Africa's unions.

Like the AFL-CIO, which last year received about \$3 million from various U.S. government agencies for its operations in Africa, those competing foreign organizations say their aim is to strengthen local unions.

But on this unstable continent, such aid also seems to have political considerations.

In many African countries, where trade unions are the strongest organizations after the government, today's union leader may be tomorrow's prime minister or president. Tanzania's Julius K. Nyerere, Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda and Guinea's Sekou Toure all once headed unions.

How badly foreign countries want to make friends among trade unionists can be seen here in Botswana, a Texas-sized country of 830,000 people, strategically sandwiched between South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Zambia.

The 11-union Botswana Federation of Trade Unions claims to have a total membership of just 22,000. Yet, last year alone, eight of its leaders took junkets to the United States; three each to the Soviet Union and China, and one each to West Germany and Kenya.

Additionally, four Botswana unionists participated in a seminar in Italy sponsored by the pro-Western International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

Masego Mavis Mophuting, the administrative officer of the federation who gave those figures, was frank about junketing.

"BFTU does not have money. Whoever invites us, we are at his mercy," she said.

Sitting in on the interview in the federation's headquarters—built in 1971 with AFL-CIO aid—was Mike Lescault, the AFL-CIO's resident representative in Botswana.

Mr. Lescault, a 35-year-old American with a master's degree in labor relations from Cornell University and organizing experience with the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, is one of 14 resident representatives the AFL-CIO's African-American Labor Center has on this continent.

Trade union activity was virtually nonexistent in Botswana before the Americans came. Today, three cabinet members are from the American-trained labor movement.

"I'm training union leaders, not political leaders," Mr. Lescault said.

Most of the money for the Botswana operation—just like most of the funding for the AFL-CIO's \$5 million-a-year Africa program—comes from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Some other government agencies also give money, but the AFL-CIO denies it receives a penny from the Central Intelligence Agency, which gave money to some of the labor organization's international activities for years after World War II.

"I take my guidelines from our office in Washington and not from the AID here," Mr. Lescault said.

The top man in the AFL-CIO international affairs department in Washington is Irving Brown, 71, a trade unionist who started his career in 1938 as an organizer at the Fisher Body plant in Baltimore.

Since those days, he has battled Communists around the world, while—according to disclosures in the 1960s—sometimes spending CIA money in the process.

In his book, "Inside the Company: A CIA Diary," Philip Agee, a former CIA operative, identified Mr. Brown as "the principal CIA agent for control of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions," the pro-Western central organization.

In an interview in his Washington office recently, Mr. Brown never directly denied his CIA links. Instead, he said, "Some people call me CIA, some other people call me a Communist."

He said talk about his CIA role was started "in Moscow" 24 years ago after "I was in Finland and we threw the Communists out of the unions."

Then, as now, he feels that "international labor solidarity" requires the Western trade unions to combat Communists throughout the world.

Mr. Brown said that the AFL-CIO works in Africa only at the request of national unions and that "we are not going to do anything other than we are asked to do."

Even so, the local AFL-CIO man often emerges as an important influence.

A 1980 summary of AFL-CIO activities in Africa had this to say about Ghana: "Most important is the fact that the ... resident representative has usually been accepted by the leadership of the [local union congress] as a friend and confidant and been able, by his advice, to significantly affect developments. This same relationship has also developed in other countries where there is a resident representative."

In these circumstances, it would appear to be possible for foreign unions to influence the direction of a country's labor movement and internal politics.

A current example is Lesotho, a mountain kingdom surrounded by South Africa. There, the AFL-CIO is pushing for the merger of two competing union movements.

Such a merger could be expected to strengthen the current government by eliminating an opposition labor movement. Asked to comment, John Gould, an AFL-CIO official in Washington, said that the "second so-called union is not a union."

Much of the Soviet bloc's trade union aid is channeled through the Communist-dominated World Federation of Trade Unions, which trains dozens of African unionists every year in Communist countries.

Also active in Africa is the International Organization of Journalists. The group, headquartered in the Czech capital of Prague, trains African journalists and tries to promote the controversial New International Information Order, ostensibly aimed at lessening Third World dependence on Western news agencies.

When Professor Kaarle Nordenstreng, the IOJ president, recently paid one of his frequent visits to Tanzania, he was greeted by local journalists as "our president."

Of the foundations that West German political parties have established as their domestic and overseas education arms, the most active in Africa is the Social Democrats' Friedrich Ebert Foundation. The foundation has had trade union advisers in Botswana, Zambia, Kenya and Ghana.

Largely funded by the West German government, the organization also tries to promote activities that in its homeland have traditionally been union-linked, such as cooperatives.

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